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ABSTRACT

Multicultural literature is one good way to raise children's awareness of diversity, but how does one decide what constitutes "good" multicultural children's literature? Most any book can be critiqued from numerous perspectives: first and foremost is the book's literary quality--plot, character development, setting, themes, and style; of secondary importance is the author's and/or illustrator's handling of a particular social issue, such as gender or cultural depictions of the characters. Critical analysis requires the use of specific language. Three different pages of Wade Hudson's "I Love My Family" (1993) were analyzed as to the use of language, taking two opposing views to demonstrate that each reader will have a unique interpretation, and that each opinion is valid, provided it is supported with evidence. The novel depicts an African-American family which gathers each summer for a family reunion on Grandpa Lawrence's farm in North Carolina. Also analyzed is Sherley Anne Williams's "Working Cotton" (1944), which depicts an African-American family of migrant laborers working in the cotton fields of the American South. Analysis suggests that there can be more than one model for family values, and that it is the interactions between family members that demonstrate values, whether the family is shown relaxing in their home or laboring in cotton fields. It is essential that classrooms contain books that depict a wide variety of cultures and of family constellations, showing characters in a wide variety of roles. (NKA)

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What is Good Multicultural Children's Literature and How Do We Critique It? Distinguishing Between Image and Value.

by Barbara Smith Reddish

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What is *Good* Multicultural Children's Literature and How Do We Critique It? Distinguishing Between Image and Value

As educators we are in the responsible position of providing accurate and straight forward information to children: information that is void of judgment, prejudice, and bias; information that is not candy-coated nor romanticized, but that is nevertheless developmentally appropriate; and information that embraces a multiplicity of perspectives rather than one narrow perspective – that of the dominant culture. We have within us the power to affect change, to influence children's thinking, and to inculcate values. Classroom libraries should include books that reflect the diversity of our culture in respectful and sincere ways. Books that feature alternative family lifestyles, books that depict people from diverse cultures in a variety of roles, books written in gender-neutral and culturally responsive language, books that feature differently-abled protagonists, as well as books that reflect and respect the local culture, all serve to broaden children's horizons and help them to cope in our global community.

Multicultural literature is one good way to raise children's awareness of diversity, but how do we decide what constitutes *good* multicultural children's literature? Most any book can be critiqued from numerous perspectives. First and foremost is the book's literary quality: plot, character development, setting, theme, and style. Secondary lenses can then be applied, such as critiquing the author's and/or illustrator's handling of a particular social issue, such as gender or cultural depictions of the literary characters.

The book titled *I Love My Family*, written in 1993 by Wade Hudson depicts an African American family who gathers each summer for a family

reunion on Grandpa Lawrence's farm in North Carolina. This book may be viewed form various perspectives, and one's critique may be focused on family values, gender depictions, or cultural stereotypes. Focusing the critique on a particular issue helps one to move beyond vague (and meaningless) statements like, "This is a very nice book", or "I loved this book and would use it in my classroom", which are nothing more than unsubstantiated opinion, to critical analysis.

Critical analysis requires the use of specific language. I will discuss three different pages from *I Love My Family* to illustrate the use of the specific language, and I will take two opposing views to demonstrate that each reader will have a unique interpretation of the book – and that each opinion is valid, provided it is supported with evidence.

The first example pictures four cousins playing basketball in Grandpa's driveway. The text reads, "Cousin Johnny claims he once played for the Harlem Globetrotters. Of course, we don't believe him." A positive statement might read like this:

> Although some readers may find this to be a candy coated version of the American family, I feel that it realistically depicts a southern family reunion. Both the author and illustrator attempt to portray fully developed characters that vary in personality traits and that interact in believable ways. For example, the protagonist's statement, *"Cousin Johnny claims he once played for the Harlem Globetrotters. Of course, we don't believe him"*, is reminiscent of the affectionate teasing that is common in many families and lends realism to the story.
>
> While an opposing view might read like this:

> I feel that both the author and illustrator failed to portray realistic characters and, instead, presented offensive stereotypes of the African American community. For example, the following statement: *"Cousin Johnny claims he once played for the Harlem Globetrotters. Of course, we don't believe him"*, portrays Johnny as an untrustworthy figure, a liar, whose only discernible contribution to society is his pipe dream of playing for a professional basketball team. By continually depicting African Americans in this manner, the author and illustrator serve to reinforce the negative and inaccurate images of a culture that has already suffered undue prejudice and oppression. Furthermore, non African American children who are repeatedly exposed to these stereotypical images, and who may already have preconceived notions about African Americans, will have their prejudices affirmed.

As opposed to bland generalizations that really say nothing at all, such as, "The family is shown playing together and that indicates strong family values." This statement is not persuasive and is unconvincing. Family members may play together, but in disrespectful ways that include mean-spirited teasing and taunting, cheating, hitting, or worse. When children, or children and adults play games it is not automatically assumed that they are demonstrating strong family values. Take the example of an older cousin or sibling who plays a board game with a younger child, where the older child takes advantage of the younger child's inexperience in order to win the game. This scenario depicts a family playing together, but does not demonstrate strong family values. It may, on the other hand, demonstrate sibling rivalry in a realistic manner.

The second example is a close-up picture of Aunt Belle. The text reads, "Aunt Belle is there too. She wears funny hats and tells funny stories that make us laugh." A positive reaction might be:

> Throughout the story we find characters who are portrayed as individuals, each with their unique personality traits and characteristics that bring them to life and enhance the literary quality of this wonderful book. Aunt Belle, for example, is described as a humorous character who makes the children laugh: *"Aunt Belle is there too. She wears funny hats and tells funny stories that make us laugh."* She is respectfully portrayed as an endearing character who is well loved by her family members. Many children who have a favorite aunt or uncle will relate to her realistic portrayal.

While a negative reaction might be:

> Over and over we find offensive cultural and gender stereotypes in this book. Aunt Belle is no exception. We are first introduced to her on page 5: *"Aunt Belle is there too. She wears funny hats and tells funny stories that make us laugh."* Aunt Belle is yet another example of both the author's and illustrator's affirmation of cultural stereotyping. Aunt Belle is the quintessential heavy-set, gregarious, loudly dressed, black woman. The illustrator's depiction of her as a large woman further enhances her stereotypical portrayal, which is not only culturally offensive, but implies that all large people are jolly, and that large women, in particular must compensate for their size by being the jovial life of the party.

Most likely, literature will contain both good and bad elements, and perhaps a more realistic reaction would be:

> While Aunt Belle serves as a fine example of the author's and the illustrator's attempt to portray a broad range of personalities in their characters, they might have considered using less comical *caricatures*, and opt, instead for less extreme portrayals as Aunt Belle. *"Aunt Belle is there too. She wears funny hats and tells funny stories that make us laugh."* Aunt Belle embodies too many of the attributes of the fat, jolly, congenial, woman to be truly believable, yet overall, the book's message of strong family ties and strong family values is undeniable.

Literature is not necessarily all good, nor is it necessarily all bad, but can be a mix of both. You may love everything about a particular book, except for one bothersome illustration, or one sentence that is problematic. Or, you may find both good and bad aspects to the text and/or illustrations throughout the entire book. For example, this book contains a two page portrait of the entire extended family to which there may be both positive and negative reactions, for example:

> One notable aspect of the book's illustrations is that each character appears, to me, to have the exact same facial features making them all look like the same person. This may be a deliberate attempt on the illustrator's part to portray a strong family resemblance, and in that sense, it serves to strengthen the underlying theme of family bonds of the togetherness and love that this family clearly shares. However, the uncanny resemblance becomes problematic when it extends beyond the blood relations and is evident even in the in-laws and the girlfriends of family members. When every character looks alike it may be construed by the reader as offensive to those who feel that it encourages stereotyping by portraying all member of a culture in exactly the same manner. It likewise serves to detract from the book's literary quality by diluting each character's individuality.

Note that these statements are focused on family values, but recognize additional themes of heritage, or gender depictions, as the case may be. Even the simplest picture books for very young readers should demonstrate literary quality and avoid didacticism, romanticism, and offensive stereotypes.

A multicultural perspective is not about knowing everything there is to know about every culture on earth, for that would be quite impossible. To really *know* something, we must experience it. Perhaps the person best qualified to assess whether a culture is being fairly portrayed is a member of that culture. Multiculturalism *is* about knowing one's own culture and understanding one's cultural values and norms, then being careful to withhold judgement based on those cultural values.

For example, Sherley Anne Williams' *Working Cotton* depicts an African American family of migrant laborers working the cotton fields of the American South. This complex and well constructed story is a glimpse into one day in the life of Shelan's family. Written in dialect, Shelan describes the day, beginning with their arrival, by bus, at the cotton fields well before sun-up. Shelan works side-by-side with her entire family who each have particular responsibilities; from the young sibling who carries the water jug, to the oldest sibling who looks after the baby. Shelan adores her big, strong father who works the fastest, picks the most cotton, disciplines the girls for fooling around too much, tells stories at break times, and sings in the fields. The family works together for the good of the whole, and the story celebrates strong family unity and strong family values. But from whose perspective?

Based on a white, middle-class, American perspective, such as my own, I am tempted, on one hand, to feel sorry for this family, despite the respectful ways in which the author has portrayed them. They have not achieved my *American Dream* of homeownership. They do not speak academic American English. They do not own an automobile, or much else for that matter. Their children labor long hours in the hot sun at a job once relegated to African slaves and the most impoverished whites. On the other hand, I know that it is condescending of me to feel sorry for this family who show no evidence whatsoever of feeling sorry for themselves. Perhaps I am imposing my own model of happiness onto them – a form of oppression – and when they fall short, based on this model, then they are somehow "less than".

The issue is complex. While I do value their togetherness, strength, and compassion for one-another, I am left wondering if a family of migrant workers wouldn't rather be professionally employed and living in a middle-class neighborhood.

High quality multicultural children's literature is essential to the preparation of all children to live in a global community. Children need to see themselves reflected in the literature and the literature must reflect the diversity of society in respectful ways. But what constitutes good multicultural children's literature? When we look closely at a particular literary character, analyzing their speech and actions in an attempt to decide whether they have been portrayed in a respectful manner, it can be difficult to discern whether their speech/actions are germane to their culture, or to their individual personalities.

In general, one would not make such universal assumptions about an entire culture because there is as much diversity within cultures, as there is among cultures. So, the analysis of a literary character's speech/actions should be based on that character's personality; i.e., their speech/actions should be consistent with their personalities and with the setting of the story.

In the case of Working Cotton, Shelan's speech is the colloquial Southern African American vernacular, "We gets to the fields early, before it's even light. Sometimes I still be sleep." Does this non-standard American English merely serve to reinforce negative stereotypes of African Americans? …not if we value diversity. To do so requires that we separate the issue from the image.

A child from a white, middle-class home might see an illustration of a white, middle-class family and assume that the illustration is depicting strong family values, when in fact the illustration is merely depicting a group of people, and nothing more. The *values* are only evident in the interactions of the family members. Using the same formula, the same child might see an illustration depicting a family of African American migrant workers laboring in the fields, and assume that the African American family does *not* demonstrate strong family values. How could they when they are so completely different form the first picture?

So we have to look beyond the surface and beyond the image, to what is happening in the story; to the values that are demonstrated, before we can make judgements. All cultures, families, and individuals are different. Neither one's culture nor one's family constellation guarantees, nor demonstrates, good or bad

values. For example, a very traditional nuclear family (mom, dad, child(ren)) are not necessarily the model for family values. It is the interactions between family members that demonstrate values, whether the family is shown relaxing in their home, or laboring in cotton fields.

It is essential that classrooms contain books that depict a wide variety of cultures and of family constellations, showing characters in a wide variety of roles. Of course, there are didactic multicultural books, whose sole purpose, it seems, is to preach multiculturalism. These books feel superficially "politically correct", and do not measure up to tough literary standards of plot, characterization, setting, and so on. Many of these books were published more than a decade ago and are reactions to the historical lack of multicultural children's literature. I have found though, that children's books published even earlier (pre 1970) are quite useful in the classroom as they often demonstrate, quite explicitly, offensive cultural and gender stereotypes – or simply avoid any mention whatsoever of diversity.

It is widely agreed that children who are exposed to good multicultural literature; books that maintain a high level of literary quality and depict it's characters respectfully and in a wide variety of roles, will be better prepared to cope in a global society.

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